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ABSTRACT

Education, like experience in general, is not static but evolutionary. The writing classroom of the two-year college must and does function as a multicultural environment which replaces the traditional melting pot metaphor with images of mosaic and tapestry. Today, over 50% of college freshmen are enrolled in two-year colleges, and these include students who are diverse in economic backgrounds, religions, races, and writing abilities. Thus, a sense of the world community has influenced the environments of composition classrooms. Primarily, it is vital that diversity and multiculturalism remain key aspects of the move toward such a community. In diverse classrooms, groups and assignments can be organized to include as many perspectives as possible. Reading aloud to the students can foster interesting discussions. Portfolio assessment can also provide momentum for student revision. Computer networking in composition courses also has proven useful. In short, the multicultural writing classroom can produce the necessary connections for all students, and multicultural writing communities strengthen the student writer and reader. (HB)

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Connections Through Inclusion

(Multicultural Writing Community of the Two Year College)

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Elan vital, the vital impulse or force, is a term used by Henri Bergson, the French philosopher whose theories influenced many areas of 20th century thought. He believed that the entire evolutionary process should be interpreted as the endurance of an elan vital, that is developing and generating new forms. Evolution to Bergson is creative and continuous. Defining experience in terms of a static universe is impossible. *Defining education in terms of a static universe is also impossible.* Experience is something that occurs in flux. Bergson believed that humans can render themselves rigid and this translates into a "blindness" (Charney 7). This simplistic paraphrase of Bergson's idea contains a parallel in American higher education. A question appears; can students sustain the vital impulse necessary for learning? Have many educators become rigid and unable to perceive the dynamic, holistic evolution which is education.

Despite the pragmatic and inescapable obstacles of economics and politics, education can retain the elan vital. Confirmation of this has appeared in the debate over multiculturalism, cross culture curriculum, political correctness, pluralism, etc.... Choose your favorite term, but the undeniable fact is that the dialogue over this issue has become a catalyst. Yet, an academic common ground has been re-established; argue, watch, listen. Staid, distant posturing on matters of curriculum has been replaced by an energizing debate--a vitality renewed.

Community colleges participate in this dialogue, often supporting the hypothesis that the melting pot is no longer a viable metaphor. Through discussion and response it is replaced by images of mosaic and tapestry. The obsolescence of the melting pot has been guaranteed by its inability to function effectively.

The writing classroom of the two year college must and does function as a multicultural environment on two distinct levels. Students entering the two year college reflect a mixture of immediate and historical community. Diversity in these classrooms, rather than simply being recognized, is celebrated. Cultural integrity is preserved.

Yet, the two year institution's commitment to diversity exceeds the demographics of school enrollment. Community colleges must work to sensitize all students to the redefinition of community. Bergson's elan is the

dynamic force which feeds the desire for knowledge, intellectual challenge and discovery in the multicultural writing classroom.

Historically, the junior college began as a response to a problem identified by several university presidents. Among them was William Rainey Harper of the University of Chicago. He perceived the first two years of higher education as relegated to secondary schooling in function and content. In 1892, Harper separated the freshman and sophomore classes from upper level and called these a junior college (Brint and Karabel 25). Throughout the nearly one hundred years that followed, expansion and transformation characterized the growth of community colleges.

This unique niche in higher education began as one single junior college in 1901 in Joliet, Illinois and expanded to 1,200 institutions in the 1980s. In 1920, two year colleges enrolled 2% of all college freshmen, but in 1986 over 50% of college freshmen were enrolled in two year institutions (6). As societal parameters shifted, descriptors of student profiles widened. Women accounted for 53% of all students and community colleges enrolled 47% of all minority students in higher education (Cohen and Brawer 41). This growth occurred primarily in the last thirty years. The percentage of diverse student populations increased and so did the demands for teaching within this diversity. Rigid adherence to status quo became destructive and elitist. The desire for an improved definition of community became a desperate need.

As Joseph Campbell concluded in *Hero With A Thousand Faces*, "the community today is the planet, not the bounded nation...a single song is being inflected through all colorations of the human choir"(390). This was written in the 1940s and yet the same mandate for reshaping community continues today. It cannot be based on conformity through imposed consensus, but on an acceptance and acknowledgement of difference (Scott 43).

The demand for a better community **is** being answered in the environment of composition classrooms. These include students who are diverse in economic backgrounds, religions, race, and writing abilities. "Community colleges are often the institutions where minority, low income and medium income students are concentrated...these are students that society expects to cross class boundaries (Rednon 4).

However, a 'blindness' occurs which often obscures complete examination of the classroom. The description of student diversity remains accurate, but contrasts to the percentages and statistics produced recently which show students moving from high schools to colleges. Although minorities graduate from high school with greater frequency, we are seeing lower percentages of minority college graduates. Without the support and utilization of multicultural communities of learning, an obdurate truth surfaces. Higher education 'loses' more students than it keeps.

A 1986 study of two year colleges presents percentages for student enrollment state by state: California had 65% traditional students and 35% non-traditional students, Florida had 75% traditional students and 25% non- traditional , and Ohio had 89% traditional and 11% non-traditional students. In that inescapable fact, appears a dictate: we must teach, sensitize ourselves as well as our students to a multicultural world. After the dust from chaotic debate and challenge settles, it seems that Burton Clark's identification of the "cooling out" function has not yet disappeared. (Brint and Karabel 77).

To redefine classroom community,and maintain the fluid movement intrinsic to quality education, stronger more lasting connections must exist between the students and their learning, their writing, their desire for knowledge as well as critical literacy. Connections are the test -- these pragmatic attempts by instructors to "practice what we preach." Although each campus remains unique , the desire and need for a writing classroom which is both productive and exhilarating is a consistent goal. How to establish the connections depends upon the style and motivation of each instructor. However, multicultural curriculum becomes a vital connection, one of inclusion. Students and teachers write, read, and listen to the language of their community.

From the ideal perspective of hindsight. I will tell you what has succeeded and what has not --yet .

At 10:00 am on Monday, Wednesday and Friday I face one of my Composition I classes. Among the twenty-three students staring at me are: Phunkai, Thulan, Huu, Nefer, Paulo, Juan, Hunkai, Bobby, Sundus and Larshunda. These students represent eight different countries and

cultures which include four separate religious traditions. Deliberately and carefully this group must function as a writing community.

The dialogue of respect necessary for any productive and vital community begins with collaboration. Groups are created to include as many diverse perspectives as possible. Writing assignments and response writings are turned in (one from each group). Often the group will answer a question or construct a challenge pertaining to a general issue.

The group which I joined quickly spun from the topic assigned to the differences in speaking and writing languages. There were a total of twelve possible languages in this group of four. Again, dialogue gave impetus to the awareness and celebration of diversity rather than a polite acceptance. Additionally,these groups provide peer editors for each writing assignment.

Another pragmatic attempt to connect students to their potential as competent writers and to their world takes place in the initial five minutes of class. During this time, I read aloud to each Composition I class. These readings are taken from newspapers, works of fiction, past student essays, and my own timed writings. The force and magic of words can be heard, and reinforces student writers with a variety of additional writing models. The readings also connects them to a larger community. Writers used last semester included, Alice Walker, White Deer of Autumn, Richard Selzer, Mike Royko, Anna Quindlen, and Peter Meinke and Susan Sarandon.

Students listen closely to the power of language and discuss the more controversial writings in class and in their groups. Ideas for their own essays often come from an issue heard in one of the readings.

The essays assigned to Composition I students from their texts also represent as diverse a range of style, tone, culture and issue as possible. Students are encouraged to write from their own experiences and connect to the experiences of others. "We are our culture"(Mead 21).

One other practical strategy which provides momentum for each student writer to revise his/or her own words is the method of portfolio assessment. In my portfolio classes, grades are not given for any piece of writing. Written evaluations and writing conferences reflect and assess students' progress. However, the student controls their grade for the course by selecting only their best writing for the portfolio. The entire grade of the course depends upon each student's portfolio.

In using these and other methods we are linking students to the larger community; they will write and read with an increased appetite for knowledge and an expanded insight. The multicultural writing community becomes a vehicle for establishing their own connections to the group, and realizing their worth as communicators or 'word warriors'.

In presenting some of the pragmatic applications of this discussion, it seems I focus only on the diversity in the students. Yet that is simply, the most obvious but not the only dimension of writing within a multicultural classroom. **All Composition I students** work within this environment and receive the same curriculum and redefinition of the community. They must be sensitized to their world. To teach only to diversity encourages the pervasive 'blindness' and intolerance that plagues many classrooms and our nation.

Examining the statistics again presents evidence of the remnants of a static universe. As Ringer stated, American higher education *may* be inclusive but it has not been progressive. (Brint and Karabel 267). A study of six community colleges with large proportions of minority students found that many of these students were not aware of their own academic potential (Rendon7).

In our department on the St. Petersburg Campus,we are adapting and changing constantly to provide students with a pragmatic and challenging learning environment. We struggle to implement new strategies and devices to create effective and confident student writers, while tenaciously holding on to what has worked from the past.

Connections established through the multicultural writing classroom, work toward the igniting of a passion for writing and literature before the end of the sixteenth week and include ESL classes which have been created on three levels, to provide foreign born students with efficient language attack strategies lab courses. Composition I and Composition II classes may take place in the Computer Lab. This is not a word processing class. Our lab is networked and students are using another medium for dialogue and response to one another and to students of other classes. One instructor expands the community of the classroom by team teaching with a colleague in Wisconsin. Their students are networked during the class periods. Another connection comes from writers in the immediate community. They move into our classrooms and work with students on

voice, style, and structure. Additional reinforcement comes from the instructors who publish student writings in classroom anthologies, collective journals and a Critical Issues journal which is kept in the library.

Students and instructors are immersed in language which reflects the diversity not only in their classroom, but in their world. "If higher education were to take as its role the creation of new structures of dialogue, invention and cooperative discovery, there may indeed emerge a new world order" (Hill 47).This imperative points to the community college.

The multicultural writing classroom can produce the necessary 'connections' for each and all students. These connections revive the elan vital. Bergson believed this force to be needed by all. He states, "human beings can be ridiculous..human life is endlessly rich and fertile, inexhaustible in variety and interest" (Schilling 14).This elan can not disappear when we enter a classroom of higher education.

At 42, and with an ample supply of gray hair, I offer no magic solutions and some of what I have stated, you may have heard before. Yet it is our vital force and energy that must also be sustained . I believe that multicultural writing communities strengthen the student writer and reader. Cultural sensitization sustains an elan vital and students begin to write, speak, and read language with a renewed intensity and integrity.

In roaming the library during an attack of procrastination, I found this quote by Margaret Mead, cultural anthropologist. It was written in the conclusion of her book *Keep Your Powder Dry* in 1943. It seemed a fit warning for educators and ending to this presentation.

'As long as there is anywhere in the world a center of infectious tolerance, intolerance for a race, or a sex, an age group or an occupation, a caste, or a class or for those who profess one religion superior to another, all of us are endangered, every day, every hour "(241).